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The First American—Abraham Lincoln

AN APPEAL TO THE CITIZENS OF OUR STATE AND CITY *

BY HENRY B. RANKIN

510 SOUTH SECOND STREET, SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS

On the morning of April 15, 1915, at twenty-two minutes after seven o'clock, a half century had elapsed since the generous heart of Abraham Lincoln ceased to beat.

Today a new generation, amid startling contrasts of environment, pause to look back over that half century span. Governor Dunne by his official proclamation of March 27, 1915, "directs that on this day (April 15, 1915,) the national flag be placed at half-staff on all public buildings of the State."

The Governor in his proclamation "urges that the day be fittingly observed in the public schools to the end that the children of this generation may have better brought to their minds the facts of our national history and implanting a deeper appreciation of their priceless heritage."

In consonance with this proclamation of Governor Dunne, I ask attention to some events and surroundings of fifty years ago. In connection with these associations of the past, I wish to add an appeal to the good citizens of this city and our State. I wish to suggest that their patriotic interest and generosity manifested in observing this semi-centennial, shall take some practical shape by suitable arrangements for marking the principal localities in the city of Springfield that were associated with the life and personality of Abraham Lincoln.

Before midnight, April 14, 1865, the wires carried this startling message:

"President Lincoln has been shot!"

Anxious citizens throughout the night hoped and prayed that his life might be spared. Message after message became

*Brought into publication April 15, 1915, in the Illinois State Register and Illinois State Journal, commemorative of Abraham Lincoln, the first half century after his death.

less and less assuring. Hour after hour, disheartening telegrams made the nation—the South no less than the North—tremulous with forebodings for what the future had in store if we lost the guiding hand of Abraham Lincoln. In Illinois, and especially in this city, the news was more personal and distressing. Then the end came. On the morning of April 15, 1865, in such a hush of expectancy and uncertainty as this nation had never experienced before,—the telegraph carried this short and terrible message:

“At twenty-two minutes past seven President Lincoln died.”

The closing hours of Mr. Lincoln's presence in this city were drawing near on the evening of February 10, 1861, when he and Mr. Herndon passed down their office stairway for the last time. Mr. Lincoln was to depart for Washington the next morning. He had just before signified his expectation of returning again to this city, by requesting Mr. Herndon to let the office sign remain and conduct business in the firm's name as it had been, until he should return to Springfield, when he said they would resume their law practice together, the same “as if nothing had happened.”

The departure of Abraham Lincoln from Springfield on the morning of February 11, 1861, measured a larger loss to our city than that of any citizen who ever left us. During the five years following his departure, the little swinging sign, “Lincoln and Herndon,” was a reminder and assurance that some day the senior partner would return and go in and out as of yore, brightening our city by his presence and genial personality as none other ever had.

Visitors and citizens for five years had missed the stalwart senior partner's presence on our streets and his passing in and out under the little sign that had marked the office stairway so many years. Mr. Lincoln had no foes among us other than political. Even these, when they came near enough in neighborly or business relations to know him, forgot their partisanship and learned to love him.

The little sign had hung outside the narrow stairway entrance to the office, with its inviting welcome to friend and foe

alike for twenty-one years. None of us were prepared for the startling shock that came when black drapery covered and darkened the familiar stairway and office front on the terrible morning following America's darkest night of April 14, 1865. The end had come. The sign was removed only when the bullet of the pro-slavery assassin Booth dissolved the firm and the senior partner passed beyond his strange, strenuous, sacrificial life. That day, after martyrdom closed this law firm, was the saddest that ever came to Springfield, the darkest recorded in the nation's history; for in the hour of our supremest need, we had lost our First American.

As one of the few remaining citizens who personally knew Abraham Lincoln in this city where he lived during the early years of his mature and strenuous manhood, I wish to make an earnest appeal. This city was where Abraham Lincoln began those political activities which became, while he was here, the storm center of a truer nationality and that widened into the national prominence that elected him to the presidency. It is from the line of such memories of Abraham Lincoln's life while in this city, that I come to you with this appeal, that as a city and State, we all face a duty and rejoice in a privilege.

To this State and this city, a stricken nation brought the body of Abraham Lincoln. Here is to be the resting place for ages to come of his mortal remains. To our care they committed this as a sacred trust; but this trust has a larger meaning and does not find its limits at his tomb. The obligation of the State of Illinois and the city of Springfield to the nation and world means more than their care of that monument. His name and fame is the priceless heritage of our State, and of this city, where he was our neighbor, friend, companion. No one ever loved and served more faithfully our city and our State than Abraham Lincoln.

Future generations will not condone any neglect or omission on our part to preserve as historic mementoes in this city whatever was here connected with the life of Abraham Lincoln. The memory of his resplendent personality and national services should become part of our State's and of this city's proud heritage for all time. It depends largely on ourselves whether this be so. Through this man's citizenship—if we

prize his services and are faithful to his memory—our State's capital will become with Mecca, the Delphian Vales, and Palestine, one more of the world's venerated shrines. To us belong the exclusive privilege and high duty to preserve not only those sacred surroundings of his tomb, but also, while it is at all possible, to mark with appropriate tablets and inscriptions all places in this city which are associated with notable events of Abraham Lincoln's public and private life. Such mementoes would convey to our country's future citizens a vivid sense of the reality of Lincoln's life in Springfield. They would fulfill the expectations of visitors who in coming years will visit the city of him whose life stands so pre-eminently for fidelity, for law, for liberty. They can, and there should be, a living embodiment of the Lincoln spirit in this city, more appealing than his tomb. He still lives.

No citizens ever had a greater opportunity and privilege than we of Springfield now have to link with a great personality, our own corporate name and future honor. The limit of delay is at hand. There is need of speedy and critical care and attention to locate and preserve appropriately all things that are related to the life and personality of Abraham Lincoln while he lived in Springfield. His life among us is our city's most valuable asset and enduring honor.

Places remindful of his every day life in this city are one by one passing beyond recognition. The few who can now fix their location with precision, are soon to pass into the silence that removes the possibility of identification. We are entering the period when questioning thousands will visit our city, seeking all that is here made sacred by association with eventful incidents in the life of Abraham Lincoln. I appeal to you to locate with appropriate tablets, now while it may be done, all historic localities of his presence and life among us.

I will mention some, but not all of the places that might deserve marking by appropriate historical tablets. Some tablets or inscriptions might necessarily vary slightly from their former exact position, but none materially so.

The graves of John T. Stuart and Stephen T. Logan should bear the dates of their respective law partnerships with Lincoln and some words regarding their intimacy; also the grave

of James C. Conkling should bear some extracts from President Lincoln's letter to Mr. Conkling of August 26, 1863, regarding the meeting of Unconditional Union men to be held in this city September 3rd of that year. This letter was one of the most forceful and effective state papers President Lincoln ever penned. The original letter is now in the Illinois State Historical Library, by the gift of his son, Mr. Clinton L. Conkling. Its immediate influence on the loyal part of the Nation was shown in the immense increase of volunteering; nearly a million men enlisted in less than two months after its publication.

The grave of William H. Herndon, his last law partner, has now no suitable stone to mark it. Let an appropriate one be erected with dates of the beginning and end of their partnership. Mark it with some memorial inscription voicing Herndon's principles at that time. If none be considered more appropriate, I suggest a sentence he wrote in an autographic album February 23, 1858, following lines and autograph of Abraham Lincoln, written on the same date:

"The struggles of this age and succeeding ages for God and Man—Religion—Humanity and *Liberty*—with all their complex and grand relations—may they triumph and conquer forever, is my ardent wish and most fervent soul prayer. Feb. 23, 1858. Wm. H. Herndon."

The pew No. 20 occupied by Mr. Lincoln and family in the old building of the First Presbyterian Church, was procured by Mr. John W. Bunn and presented by him to that church. It is now the front pew in the center section of this church. To the present inscription should be added, in clear lettering on silver plate, the last paragraph, or better yet, all of President Lincoln's last inaugural address. At least the following should be there:

"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right,—let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the Nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for the widow, and his orphan; to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Also, as companion piece to this, engrave the full letter President Lincoln wrote to Thurlow Weed, eleven days after he delivered this inaugural address:

“Executive Mansion, Washington.
March 15, 1865.

“Dear Mr. Weed:

Every one likes a compliment. Thank you for yours on my notification speech and on the recent inaugural address.

I expect the latter to wear as well as,—perhaps better than,—anything I have produced; but I believe it is not immediately popular.

Men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them. To deny it, however, in this case, is to deny that there is a God governing the world. It is a truth which I thought needed to be told, and as whatever of humiliation there is in it falls most directly on myself, I thought others might afford for me to tell it.

Yours truly,
A. Lincoln.”

Mark the location of the several offices Lincoln occupied with his three law partners, giving their respective dates.

Mark where the old Court House stood, on the northeast corner of the public square, where he first and last practised law in the Circuit Court. Mark the Supreme Court room in the old State House (now Court House), where the records show he appeared as attorney in one hundred and seventy-two cases during his twenty-four years of law practice.

Mark in Representatives Hall of the old State Capitol building (now Court House), where he delivered from the speaker's platform his speech on “A house divided against itself cannot stand,” and several other of his speeches of national importance.

Mark the room in the old State House where he first read privately to a few political friends, the complete text of the “House divided, etc. etc.” That room was then the State Library, where he spent much time—especially from 1854 to 1860, as a regular library reader, or meeting his friends there

for social and political conferences. Also mark the room he occupied in the old State House after his election as President, until his departure to Washington.

Mark the position of room in the third story of the C. M. Smith store building on the south side of the public square, where he wrote his first inaugural address, before leaving Springfield for Washington.

Mark the place at the Wabash Railway station, in lasting granite, where he delivered his Farewell Address, and engrave the full text of that address thereon.*

Most important of all, next to the tomb itself, is the proper preservation of the Lincoln residence. As soon as the contemplated Lincoln Memorial Hall is completed and provision made there for an exhibit of Lincoln relics, restore the Lincoln home to the furnishings it had in 1854 to 1861, as nearly as can possibly be done. Have this home kept for the Lincoln family's memory, as Mount Vernon is kept today, just as the Washingtons had it while they lived there.

Gather together in the new State Historical building about to be erected in this city, in a large, specially designed Lincoln Hall memorial room, all worthy souvenirs and relics of Abraham Lincoln that can be collected from all sources. Most especially should this Lincoln Hall have a complete collection of Abraham Lincoln's busts, photographs, portraits, etc.; his writings, letters and speeches; the complete assemblage of all books and pamphlets and the life of Lincoln in all languages, that have been published in the world; adding thereto from time to time, all such publications. This hall to be placed by the State in care of an active, well-qualified student of Lincoln's time and history.

Senator Cullom, near the close of his long public service secured from Congress two million dollars he asked for, to erect in Washington a national memorial to President Lincoln. My thoughts linger sadly over these sentences that mention the passing away of the great commoner at Washington with regrets that he had not begun sooner, so that he might

*Since this appeal was brought into publication, the Springfield Chapter of Daughters of the American Revolution, on June 14, 1915, placed at the old Wabash Station, a granite stone with bronze tablet bearing the full text of this Farewell Address.

have more fully perfected all the plans he had so anxiously in view for that monument. In his last conscious moments his thoughts and words were of his interest in this memorial—its plans and erection—and thankfulness for the nation-wide sympathy with him in this subject. He greatly lamented leaving this labor of love unfinished.

The last letter I had from him, written only a short time before his death, was to assure me that Mr. Lincoln's Farewell Address delivered here the morning he departed for Washington, and which had not been included in the first plans, should have an appropriate position given to it in the memorial, with the Gettysburg speech and the last inaugural address. Since Senator Cullom's death I have had assurances that the memorial commission will place the tablet with this Farewell Address in a central position immediately behind the heroic bronze statue of Abraham Lincoln, thus giving it the most conspicuous position in the National Memorial Hall. "It is altogether fitting and proper" that this Address be placed in such prominence. These sentences were Mr. Lincoln's first words spoken on the threshold of his appearance in executive view as the Nation's chief. They embody, as we now see, a Nation's prelude by its Chief to the historic tragedy then ushering in. The words are no longer for the few he addressed them to in his home city, but—alike with him who spoke them—they belong to the ages!

The nation has not been unmindful of the great services of President Lincoln. His fidelity and patriotism, his faith and hope, his inflexible purpose,—unshaken by disaster or defeat,—"to achieve and cherish a just and lasting union of the States," have now received prompt and gratifying recognition by all the United States, in provision for this memorial monument at Washington.

This national memorial admonishes our State and city to face their duty and presents the opportunity to arise to their privilege. Placing appropriately marked mementoes at the several localities in this city which can make voiceful and perennial here, all events associated with the life of Abraham Lincoln in his home town, is the part now remaining to be done by us, in honor and appreciation by our city and State, of our most illustrious citizen and the nation's First American.